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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001358

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN LAUNCHES NATIONAL DIALOGUE

REF: BEIRUT 1223

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) President Michel Sleiman launched the National Dialogue on September 16. As expected, this first session produced no significant results. The next session is scheduled for November 5. In his opening remarks, Sleiman stressed the need for dialogue and reconciliation, cited Israel as Lebanon's primary threat, and, echoing his May 25 inaugural speech, called for a national defense strategy that "benefited from the Resistance." Opposition leaders asked to broaden both the agenda and the list of participants, in what we view as a transparent attempt to shift the Dialogue's focus away from Hizballah arms, a subject Hizballah leaders clearly declared off limits in public statements in the days leading up to the launch. End summary.

¶2. (C) President Michel Sleiman convened the National Dialogue at 11:30 am local time September 16 at Baabda Palace, a half hour late, after meeting separately with Speaker Nabih Berri, majority leader Saad Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa (who praised Sleiman's speech but otherwise did not speak) and 14 Lebanese leaders representing the main political blocs attended the Dialogue. These were the same leaders who attended the May 2008 Doha conference. Unlike previous sessions, advisors did not attend. Sleiman presided sitting at the head of a rectangular table, emphasizing his independent role separate from the participants. By contrast, Speaker Nabih Berri's 2006 National Dialogue was held at a round table reflecting his role as both chairman and participant. The Emir of Qatar and Syrian President Bashar Asad (in his capacity as this year's chair of the Arab League) reportedly also were both briefed on the launch. The next dialogue session is scheduled to take place November 5.

¶3. (U) In his opening speech, Sleiman stressed the importance of frank dialogue and reconciliation as the only way to reach consensus, adding that failure was not an option. He asked the participants to draw a general framework for the dialogue in terms of form and content. He also thanked the Arab League and Qatar for their efforts in brokering consensus in Lebanon.

¶4. (C) Sleiman warned that Israel was Lebanon's main source of danger, citing its continued aggression against Lebanon, especially the occupation of Sheba'a Farms, Kfarshouba Hills, and the northern part of Ghajar, as well as violations of UNSCR 1701. Sleiman called for a comprehensive defense strategy that protects Lebanon, based on the armed forces and benefiting from the capabilities of the "resistance." (Note: Sleiman's May 25 inaugural speech used similar language. End note.) Sleiman applauded the September 15 reconciliation meeting between Hizballah and rival Druze parties (septel).

¶5. (C) Sleiman also called for parliament to approve a new electoral law as soon as possible. (Note: Contacts assure us that parliament will approve the new law before the end the month. End note.) He urged the media to approach the National Dialogue in a professional manner, to avoid confessional and political tension.

¶6. (U) Following the session, the presidential palace issued a six-point statement noting: 1) the launch and prioritization of talks to reach agreement on the defense strategy; 2) The need to deal with security tensions quickly and agree on a mechanism to end all clashes and promote reconciliation; 3) the need for an honorary agreement among the media to ease political and media discourse and abide by the presidential inaugural speech; 4) the need to implement the decisions reached in previous dialogue sessions; 5) the need for follow-up sessions chaired by President Sleiman to forge reconciliation; and 6) a second dialogue session scheduled for November 5, 2008.

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LET THE BATTLE (OVER  
HIZBALLAH'S ARMS) BEGIN...OR NOT  
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¶7. (C) According to the Doha agreement, the Dialogue's primary purpose is to tackle the controversial issue of the defense strategy, including, although this is not explicitly stated, the role of Hizballah's arms. As expected, however, Hizballah reportedly attempted to enlarge the agenda, a move that was opposed by March 14. Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun reportedly asked to expand the list of participants, also opposed by March 14; the issue was deferred to President Sleiman to decide after further consultations with party leaders.

¶8. (C) In the days leading up to the launch, Hizballah officials indicated a clear red line on the issue of arms. Hizballah Deputy SYG Naim Qassim stressed three rules necessary for the talks to succeed: agreement that Israel is the ultimate enemy, belief in building a capable and fair state, and ensuring the resistance and defense fundamentals. Internal relations chief Nawwaf Moussawi warned that, "He who believes that sitting at the dialogue table is to disarm Hizballah for the sake of Israel and the America is disillusioned." Moussawi also included economic, education, political, and military issues as necessary agenda items. Meanwhile, Nabil Qaouq, the Hizballah official in charge of south Lebanon, said in a September 13 statement that, "Any discussion of disarming (Hizballah) is in the past, but that Hizballah would take part in the Dialogue "to discuss the mechanism of coordination between the army and the resistance."

AN INDEPENDENT SHIA VIEW  
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¶9. (U) Independent Shia Minister of State Ibrahim Shamseddine, allied with the pro-western majority, told a Saudi interviewer on September 13 that nothing significant could be expected of the first session, but that hard work could lead to good results that benefit Lebanon. He opposed expanding the agenda, noting that both the Doha agreement and

the ministerial statement stipulate that the national defense strategy is the Dialogue's sole topic of discussion. Shamseddine reportedly said the Resistance must retain its weapons as long as there is (Israeli) occupation, but they should not be used to disrupt domestic safety. He added that the weapons are an internal issue and need to be resolved within the Lebanese framework, though he called on Hizballah to "deal positively and wisely" with the Dialogue's proposals.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) Sleiman stated publicly that his decision to launch the Dialogue now was to demonstrate a position of strength before embarking on his first trip to the U.S. as president. MP Akram Shehayyeb affirmed this on September 16, adding, however that Sleiman was trying to prove he was doing something on the question of Hizballah arms to avoid being criticized in New York and Washington. Unfortunately, Shehayyeb added, this strengthened Hizballah by shielding them from outside attacks. Meanwhile, the division of labor between Hizballah and Aoun -- one calling for an expanded agenda, the other for an expanded participants list -- confirms our belief that the opposition's strategy is to water down and delay the Dialogue as much as possible to ensure that Hizballah's arms remain out of reach.

SISON